The Only Living Boy In Pittsburgh

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The Only Living Boy In Pittsburgh

by HopelessLimerent

Summary

"Where does it hurt?"

"What?"

"The pain. I'm not playing this fucking game with you anymore. Where is the pain?" He waited, stared, until finally Dennis's eyes came up from the floor and locked in on his own. "You're one of the most driven people I've had the pleasure of working with in a long time, Whitaker, and you are off your game in a big way. I've seen you sit down more times in the past eight hours than I've seen you sit ever. You're barely eating, you're dragging ass, and - please excuse how direct I'm being when I say this- you've been downright bitchy the past three days." Dennis's face fell, and he tilted his head back down, eyes locking in and beginning to count the speckles in the tile floor, until long, deft fingers met his chin and tilted his face back upward, forcing him back into the eye contact that would be his undoing. "Tell me where it hurts."

Notes

So I accidentally created a lot of hype for this on Twitter, so I hope it lives up to it lol I had an emergency cholecystectomy a couple years ago, so I figured it would be fun to force that on Dennis. I was also very lucky to have good insurance that covered almost the entirety of the nearly $40k bill for it which is less fun, so there's definitely some exploration of Dennis's thought process surrounding what an emergency medical issue (and treatment) looks like for an uninsured American. So lots of feelings, lots of projecting (I, too, waited until a couple hours before the end of my last shift of a 50 hour work week to go to the ER after 5 days of gallbladder attacks), and lots of these two showing they care in their weird, fucked up, traumatized ways. There are allusions to both scripture and Saw (2004) peppered in, too, because of who I am as a person.

Title inspired by The Only Living Boy In New York by Simon & Garfunkel.

See the end of the work for more notes

Dennis was three weeks in on his current rotation. Originally a 4-week stint, he'd managed to do enough pleading and convincing to extend it to six, with his most convincing argument coming in the form of an unorthodox letter of recommendation from Dr. Robinavitch. Until coming to PTMC, he was beginning to doubt he had a specific calling and had settled for aiming toward a career in primary care, but Dennis felt drawn to emergency medicine in a way he'd not felt particularly pulled before, and even without his words confirming it, his actions and performance showed it, prompting several frank conversations with Dr. Robby and culminating in their joint effort to buy him some more time in the pitt.

And because of that passion, it was glaringly obvious to Robby that something was wrong when Dennis came shuffling in fifteen minutes late on day one of week four. "Whitaker, c'mere."

Dennis was still shoving his jacket into his locker when Robby's words cut through the pseudo-silence, and he flinched against it, the sound almost painful as it vibrated his ear drums and tickled his already hyperalert nerves. He shut the locker softly and secured it before turning toward the sound of his attending's voice. "Sorry, Dr. Robby, I-I overslept a bit and- I mean it's no excuse, it's highly unprofessional, and it won't happen again, sir."

"Woah, hey, slow down." Robby chuckled softly as he approached, and he stopped the younger man, grabbing him by the shoulders and assessing him. Dennis had a perpetually tired look about himself, and Robby figured he came by it honestly. He remembered his own time in med school, long nights of studying, long days of classes and homework and rotations, getting by on black coffee and granola bars and cigarettes and counting the days in minutes because it was all more digestible and surmountable five minutes at a time. Dennis looked beat, his eyes dark-rimmed and heavy, a stark contrast to the paleness of his skin and slightly sunken in cheeks. "You been eating?"

"Y-yeah. Yeah, just not, you know, as much. Just busy, and my stomach's been kind of messed up." Robby's hand immediately went to the younger's forehead, and Dennis scoffed quietly before gently batting away the warm, worried knuckles resting on his brow. "I'm not sick-sick. Probably just extended too much trust to some leftover pizza."

"Any fever, vomiting, diarrhea…?"

“Dr. Robby, I’m fine, please just-” He stopped and took a deep breath before allowing his eyes to meet Robby’s. What Dennis’s mother considered his greatest strength, Dennis considered his greatest weakness, and that was his inability to lie with a straight face. The puppy dog eyes his mom so doted on consistently betrayed him, and once eye contact was established, any semblance of so much as a believable fib was gone, and Dennis was left with the option of either silence or disclosure. “I slept poorly. I had trouble getting comfortable. But I’m here now, I’m up, I’m ready to go, and I won’t be late again.” The silence between them was obtrusive, and Dennis forced a tight smile and muscled his way through it, dipping away from Robby’s touch and moving toward the sound of voices and machinery, throwing himself to the wolves.

He kept his distance throughout the day, never ignoring the frequent check-ins from Robby and Dana -who’d been tasked with keeping an eye on him by Robby himself- but always keeping them brief, blaming another alarm or raised voice or bathroom break for his need to slip away. By the time he gathered his things and headed out for the day, he was near shaking from exhaustion, and if not for walking in the door to Santos’s telling him (“with love” she clarified) that he “fucking reeks”, Dennis would’ve forgone a shower altogether before collapsing into bed.

The next day was worse, and by late afternoon Robby had him cornered in the lounge. “Out with it, Whitaker, what the hell’s going on?”

“Strained muscle.” His palm rested on his abdomen as he picked at a sandwich.

“Thought it was bad pizza.”

“Me too, but it wasn’t.” He stood up quickly, dropping the half-eaten food in the trash as he brushed past the older man, mumbling as he scurried by. “I’m fine. It’s just late in the day, and I’m tired.”

On day three Dr. Robby caught him as Dennis was leaving a patient, grabbing him by the nape of the neck and dragging him toward an empty bed before pulling the curtain shut behind them. “Where does it hurt?”

“What?”

“The pain. I’m not playing this fucking game with you anymore. Where is the pain?” He waited, stared, until finally Dennis’s eyes came up from the floor and locked in on his own. “You’re one of the most driven people I’ve had the pleasure of working with in a long time, Whitaker, and you are off your game in a big way. I’ve seen you sit down more times in the past eight hours than I’ve seen you sit *ever*. You’re barely eating, you’re dragging ass, and -please excuse how direct I’m being when I say this- you’ve been downright bitchy the past three days.” Dennis’s face fell, and he tilted his head back down, eyes locking in and beginning to count the speckles in the tile floor, until long, deft fingers met his chin and tilted his face back upward, forcing him back into the eye contact that would be his undoing. “Tell me where it hurts.”

Dennis cursed quietly to himself, setting his jaw and scowling before finally huffing out a defeated sigh. “Right upper quadrant. Sporadic pain between my shoulders, nausea, and um, dischezia.”

“How long?”

“The pain or…?” Robby only nodded, arms crossed, and waited for him to continue. “Um, it started maybe four or five days ago. And I haven’t had a bowel movement in, like, two days.”

“Dammit, Whitaker, you… Get on the bed.” He gestured vaguely to the bed behind them before walking to the side of it and plucking the transducer from the bedside ultrasound machine.

“What are we-”

“Ultrasound.” Dennis reluctantly sat on the bed and scooted backward as Robby squeezed some gel onto the device. “Come on, shirt up for me.” Robby stepped closer, hovering the device over the younger man’s midriff as he tugged his scrub top up. Finally the transducer met his abdomen, and Dennis flinched. The chill of the gel almost burned with how starkly it contrasted with the warmth of his skin, stretched across oversensitive muscle. The press of it, too, shot a wave of pain through Dennis’s body, and he groaned and twitched as it slid across his middle until an image appeared on the screen that caused Robby’s eyes to go wide. “Jesus Christ, Whitaker.” His unoccupied hand came up to the monitor, and he turned it toward Dennis, forcing the younger man to see, to look inside himself at what was causing the

ache. “What do you see here?”

“Uh…” There was an undeniable sense of defeat in his voice. “Cholelithiasis.”

“*Severe* cholelithiasis. You’re parting with your gallbladder asap.” He cleaned off the probe and set it back in place before turning to Dennis, gently cleaning the remaining gel from his skin before tugging his shirt back down into place and snapping his gloves off. Once disposed of, Robby sat on the stool next to the bed and rolled closer, allowing his knees to knock against the mattress and his palm to rest on Dennis’s knee as the younger man sat upright. The softness in Robby’s voice when he spoke only seemed to compound Dennis’s nausea. There was undeniable kindness and sincerity in it, and Dennis almost hated it, wishing Robby were capable of hollow platitudes or even “I told you so” gotchas, anything that would make Dennis baring his teeth and snarling like the cornered dog he was justifiable. But instead he was genuine and concerned, and Dennis longed for some shadow to retreat into and away from the light of it. “You know better than this. You didn’t need that ultrasound to tell you that, I *know* you’re smarter than that. You’ve got to take care of yourself, alright?”

“I know, I just… I dunno, I figured it would’ve been maybe a couple stones at most, the pain would pass, I’d muddle through it. I just…” He shrugged, resigning himself to the older man’s goodness and drumming his fingertips nervously on the mattress on either side of himself. “I-I don’t know. I don’t have time to-”

“You work in a hospital. You have time to get checked out.”

“I don’t have time to be *sick*. Or the money to, quite frankly." He tried his best to glare, knowing all too well that his eyes were vacant and hollow and that any anger he might feel was being swallowed up by exhaustion and pain, distorting whatever rage he tried to wear on his features into something pleading and spent. And so despite his appearance, Dennis raised his voice, an angry desperation launching his words like bullets from the artillery of his throat. “And I don’t *work* here. I do clinical rotations here. I *work* for under the table cash on the weekends reshoeing horses and trimming pig tusks at farms outside of town. So yeah, no time, no money.”

“Well you’re about to make the time, because that gallbladder of yours is going to kill you if you don’t get rid of it first.” Robby’s own tone was sharp and curt, but unlike the indignance fueling Dennis’s, there

was a righteousness to Robby's that made him all the more angrier. "I'm calling surgery. Grab a gown."

"Dr. Robby, I-"

"Whitaker." It was settled, evidenced by the firmness in his tone, and Dennis pulled himself up from the bed before trudging to a cabinet of gowns and retrieving one for himself. By the time Robby was off of the phone, he'd managed to strip down to his boxers and pull the gown on, resigning himself to lying back on the bed with crossed arms and welled eyes. Robby's words were again soft and sweet, and the kindness of it stuck like sap in Dennis's throat as the older man raised the head of the bed up while he spoke. "We're going to get your vitals and get some morphine in you until they can take you upstairs. Probably got an hour or so."

"Dr. Robby, I…" Finally the tears spilled over, falling silently and uninterrupted as he gasped softly, too exhausted under the weight of illness and anxiety to even properly cry as tear tracks streaked his gaunt cheeks. "I can't afford this. I don't have health insurance, I'm- I aged out of my parents's a couple years ago, and I don't have a real job or any savings or- This is going to be, what, 30, 40k? I'll be fine, I'll-"

Whether it was Robby sitting on the edge of the bed next to him or the warm, wide palms pressing to his cheeks that silenced him, Dennis couldn't be sure, but he cut himself off as he stared back into the eyes of his attending. Robby's voice was a low whisper that carried with it the same amalgam of no-nonsense intonation and heartwrenching compassion Dennis had heard before. Always, it seemed to be, in fast-moving, "make a decision now" type of cases. "You will not be fine. You will not get better on your own. You will die."

And still he wanted to fight back, to kick and scream his way out of it, to save himself the money and Dr. Robby the worry. Just push it down, pray it away, ignore it and hope it goes stagnant and starves without attention. He knew the kind of cases that came through those doors and filled the meager supply of beds. He'd quickly learned to not panic every time he saw a crash cart flying past, had relegated the screams and cursing to just another peppering of white noise, learned to focus more on the destination and less on the journey. It was hurried and helpful, and Dennis's place amongst it was to be all of the things he'd always aspired to be: merciful and pure in heart and starving for righteousness, a well-earned blessing to the mourners and

the meek who came through the doors broken and frightened and bleeding and praying. But now dressed in a gown and laid in a bed, a belly full of pain and stones and danger, Dennis was out of place, somewhere he didn't belong, *wrong* and frightened and disappointed in himself, his body, for its unannounced self-immolation. "And what kind of life is being in debt forever? With all due respect, Dr. Robby, you've been out of school and in a career for a while now, so maybe you've forgotten what it's like to be broke. I don't even own a car or- or a house. So it's, what, 40k for this, then another half a million in student loans once I'm done with school? Then if I want a car that's another 20k for something used and half decent if I'm lucky. Then a $200,000 mortgage if I stay in Pittsburgh on top of that unless I want to rent forever, and don't get me started on rent prices." He choked and sputtered, angrily digging blunt nails into his thighs, little crescent moons blooming on his skin as his hands shook against his will. "I'll never have money again, you know that right? I'm not even thirty, and I've been in debt since I was eighteen, and I'll be in debt til I die. My money isn't mine. Everything I'm working toward isn't really *mine*. It never will be. That's not living either."

And Robby was patient and kind, protective and hopeful and calm in the face of Dennis's pride and anger as he pressed a stethoscope to his heaving chest. A few quiet seconds passed as Robby listened, and Dennis closed his eyes against the calm, cool weight of it, even as his heart pistoned beneath his ribs. "I'll have Kiara get with you after surgery, okay? She can refer you to a psychiatrist to-"

"To what? Dr. Robby, to what?" Dennis's voice wavered as Robby quietly spun away from him, retrieving a blood pressure cuff as he continued his panicked rambling. "To have me talk about my feelings and prescribe me an antidepressant that I can't afford and then send me a $300 bill for the trouble?"

The ripping velcro being pulled apart rang out like a gunshot in contrast with the low coolness of Robby's voice, and Dennis huffed an indignant breath through his nose as the cuff was wrapped around his arm. "Your heart rate is elevated, and I guarantee your blood pressure is, too. The pain you're in is raising your BP, which is raising your anxiety. Let me get your vitals, then I'm going to grab you some morphine and we'll start moving in the right direction to get your mind and body back down into a calmer space, yeah?"

Dennis let his head droop and his tears fall, pattering against his lap as Robby slid the stethoscope into place between the cuff and Dennis's

flushed skin. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Alright.” He waited a moment, watched as Dennis nodded shallowly and breathed out shakily and finally let a strangled sob break free. “Whitaker?” Dennis’s eyes lifted then, and Robby offered a smile that rested somewhere between performative and forced, its sincerity almost jarring as he fit the earpieces of his stethoscope into place. “I’m on your side, alright? I’m gonna take care of you.”

And he did, quietly moving about the room to set up an IV and administer fluids and morphine, draping a blanket over his lap because he knew the chill that would come from the sudden flooding of his veins, while the rest of the world continued moving beyond the curtain. Dennis wanted to protest, to send him out to care for other patients, people worse off, even as Robby silently crossed the room once more to fill out the whiteboard on the wall. *Name - Dennis Whitaker, Care Team - Dr. Robinavitch and Nurse Dana Evans, Action Plan - cholecystectomy.* An ‘x’ in the box nearest a red frowning face under a header that read Pain Levels, a room number, a date, a time. “This is my first time being hospitalized.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.” They were quiet. “On allergies, um, adhesives. Band-Aids and the cheap drug store medical tape don’t bother me, but I’ve blistered before from kinesiology tape and Saniderm. Nothing some preemptive Benadryl can’t nip in the bud but…”

“No, that’s good to know. Thank you.” He scrawled it onto the white board before capping the marker and making his way back over to the seat next to the bed, his hand coming to rest on the shin of Dennis’s outstretched leg, still covered in a scratchy blanket. “Dr. Gordon will be doing your cholecystectomy, almost certainly laparoscopically, so that’ll get you back on your feet a little quicker than an open procedure. He’ll be in to talk to you more about that sooner rather than later. Then anesthesiology will come in and get some information from you. They’ll take you back, knock you out, and it’ll be over before you know it. You’re in great hands, Dennis.”

“I know.” They resumed the shared, comfortable quiet, Robby sporadically checking his phone or stepping out for moments at most to touch base with other staff, and he watched as Dennis’s heart rate evened out on the monitor as his pain levels came down in real time. He waited as Dr. Gordon came in, a calm veteran surgeon who Robby

himself had specifically requested for Dennis after having his own gallbladder removed by him years ago. He waited as the anesthesiologists came in and talked to him. Waited as Dennis flushed and shuffled his boxers off, dropping them in the plastic drawstring bag holding his t-shirt and scrubs and stethoscope and a couple of mints he'd tucked in his pocket at the start of the day, hoping to fool his brain out of the perpetual state of nausea that screamed from inside his empty gut. Waited until finally the wheels of the bed were unlocked as he was flanked by anesthesiologists and nurses, and the tears spilled again in time with the uptick in his heartbeat. "Dr. Robby?"

"Yeah, Dennis?" His hand came to rest on the bed, and it stopped rolling in unspoken agreement.

"My phone is in my bag. Trinity's off today. Text her and let her know what's going on. My passcode is 060471."

"I'll let her know."

"No one else. Just her."

"Just her."

Dennis's memories were vague and disjointed. The operating theater, so bright white it almost burned. Being on his back and roused awake as the intubation tube was pulled from his throat. The burning, gasping sensation of trying to pull in air through a chapped throat, his body on fire from nipples to navel -no man's land- and being asked his pain level while screaming back a desperate *ten* in a ragged whisper before falling unconscious again just as the bed began to roll toward the hallway.

When his eyes opened again he was inside a hospital room, sporadic beeping and hissing to his left from machines with tubes that ran to his body and through his hands, spilling saline and medication into his veins. The tv on the wall opposite him, nearly inaudible and providing the only illumination in the room, as King of the Hill reruns played softly. Drawn curtains to his right, and more importantly -more surprisingly, even- Dr. Robby. "How you feeling?"

Dennis finally pulled in a deep breath, sucking desperately for air and swallowing down whatever saliva his tired tongue could muddle up as it swirled around his mouth and along his teeth. A plastic cup was

suddenly in front of his face and a straw directed toward his lips as Robby offered him a drink, and Dennis gladly accepted, a low noise finally rumbling in his throat as the water spilled down it, hydrating it and removing the burn of breathing. “What time is it?”

Robby sat the water back down and glanced at his own watch. “Eight o’clock.”

“You should be downstairs. They- You’re not a PCP. They need you. You…”

“Eight p.m.”

“What? No, I- We- It was, what, like three or something? When you told me I was- That my gallbladder was fucked?”

Robby tried to keep his laughter silent, holding it close to his chest and bringing his fist up to hide the smile creeping across his lips. He’d spent plenty of time in this line of work and had watched hundreds of people coming to after anesthesia, had helped smooth over the rough edges of confusion that came with it, but he rarely if ever knew their personalities, at least not the intricate things that informed who they really were outside of the limited context of a medical emergency. He’d been witness to the good natured giggles and soft reassurances of loved ones and heard a million different versions of ‘I’m sorry, they’re not normally like this’, and he’d insisted that it was all normal and expected, that anesthesia was an unusual and jarring experience, especially with so little time to prepare before an emergency procedure. “Yeah. Yeah, your gallbladder was pretty fucked.”

“I’m so groggy…” His hand reached out, fingers flexing in the general direction of the cup, and Robby helped nudge it toward him, smiling at the flicker of pride on Dennis’s face as he lifted it up and took another sip before setting it back down with a heavy sigh and a smile. “No, I’m- I’ve been asleep for a while. Double check your phone or- or open the curtain. It’s dark because the sun’s not coming in, not because it’s late.” His eyes fell shut again as he huffed out a quiet chuckle. “*Duh.*”

“I promise it’s evening.” The light from his phone was striking in the blue-tinged glow of the room as he held it up and showed Dennis the time. “8:07pm.”

“Bullshit.” Despite the odd charm of his candor, Dennis looked better

than he had in days. His face was full, the dark circles under his eyes faded and replaced with a healthy pink glow, and his eyes were clear, albeit unfocused. Robby had respected Dennis's wishes, having only reached out to Santos and giving her a quick rundown of adjustments that may need made to the layout of the apartment and their grocery list once Dennis was home recovering. His thumb had hovered over the contact labeled Mom for several minutes, even going so far as to steal a glance at their text history. The last messages exchanged were I Love Yous from three weeks prior.

"How are you doing, Dennis?"

"Confused. Weird." He laughed before immediately wincing, gasping against the sharp, stabbing pain in his abdomen where it jumped under his fingertips. "Hurting. Hurting bad actually. Like my stomach's on fucking fire."

"Let's get you some more pain meds, yeah?"

Dennis's hand wasn't quick enough to stop Robby's before it moved to the call button and pressed it, and he whined in protest. "No, no, no… It's too much. I'm fine. I'll be fine, it's just pain."

"It's not too much, alright? Just try to relax for me."

"For you…" His eyes fell closed again just as the nurse walked in, and he felt himself fluttering in the space between awake and asleep as she fiddled with bags and tubes and buttons, all of it making sense in some part of his brain that was too inaccessible through the fog of the battle between pain and fentanyl raging in his exhausted body. Once the corner was turned from ache to relief, Dennis felt his muscles untense, and he exhaled deeply and melted into the bed, familiar under his body in a way that was as much a badge of honor as it was one of shame. "I lived in the hospital." It was whispered, a habit, Dennis supposed, that went hand-in-hand with secret telling. It had remained a secret, too, with only Trinity aware of his living situation prior to her offering him a spare room. They'd talked about it some, but it was a topic that often led to shutting down, less often to panic attacks and crying, and something he generally kept close to his chest.

"You sure did. Surgery went great, and you did really-"

"No, I lived here. Like, I fucking lived here."

“Feels that way, huh?” Robby’s hand came to rest on the rail of the bed as he watched Dennis’s facial expressions contort in thought, his eyes still squeezed shut. “Long hours, 12-hour shifts, sometimes longer. It kind of consumes everything, but you’re so goddamn good at what you do. Not everyone’s built for this, but…” The sound of sniffling cut him off, and in flashing bursts of light from the television, Robby saw tears welling and spilling down the younger man’s cheeks, rolling down and pooling on the pillowcase by his ears.

“No! You’re either not hearing me or not listening to me, I mean I- I fucking… I *literally* fucking lived here. Trinity followed me home after my first day in the pitt. That’s why I live with her.”

“Followed you home?”

“Eighth floor. Empty wing.” He waved his hand, vague and shallow, toward the door. “Still empty, too, despite how many people…”

“You…” Robby laughed nervously and gripped the railing of the bed harder. Dennis was still silently crying, his eyes now open and darting around the room and studying anything that wasn’t Robby’s eyes or hands or face, all too kind to look at if he hoped to keep himself collected. The sound of his voice cracking was almost too much in and of itself. “What do you mean, you…?”

Being the youngest of four children wasn’t the blessing his parents had tried to convince him that it was, and the wounds stuck around and reopened sporadically in spite of the bandaids they’d placed over them throughout his formative years. *Sure, we can’t afford to send you on that field trip to the zoo, but how many of your classmates have their very own farm? Yes, we know your friends are in 4H, but you don’t need 4H; if anything you should be judging those competitions, not participating in them! It’s great that your friends’s parents are helping fund their education, but it wouldn’t be fair if we did it for you and not your brothers. But look here! The church can pitch in about five hundred dollars to help with the loans, isn’t that great?* At one point Dennis had wanted children, and maybe part of him still did, but the What Ifs of his childhood were ghosts that could never be exorcised, only paid off, and until Dennis’s bank account read in such a way that he was no longer haunted, he was content in fending for himself as much as possible. “I was homeless, so I stayed in a room up there. It was a bed and a shower and a roof and that was enough. I told you, I’m fucking broke, Dr. Robby. I don’t have family here. I don’t have money. I don’t have anything but this…. Non-job.” The heel of his hand came up and

scrubbed away the tears gathered on his cheekbones before he looked up at Robby and spoke again, the floodgates thrown open by exhaustion and painkillers. “This is all I have. Everyone I know is still in fucking Nebraska. PTMC and Trinity and the whole crew and- and you. You’re all I have.”

Robby’s own eyes were welled up, and he tried his best to blink back his tears, clearing his throat with a forced, nervous laughter as he tried to soften the tension. “Opioids bring out your inner sailor, huh?”

“Guess so.” They were quiet, long enough for their ears to adjust to the bustling in the hallway and the commercials on the television, to the sound of a jet overhead and traffic and laughter on the other side of the wall. When Dennis broke the silence, it was barely above a whisper, a soft, nervous voice that he’d not heard come from himself in years. “You think I can do this, right? I’ve not wasted my time in med school?”

“Of course you can do this. You *are* doing this. You’re a brilliant doctor.”

“Student doctor.”

“Toe-may-toe, toe-mah-toe.” They both seemed to relax, breathing out desperate lungfuls of air on quiet, polite laughter. “Point is, you’re excellent at what you do. And I know everything is really… fucked up and frightening. And the world we’re living in now, economically, is not the world I was living in at your age. But I will not let you fail, alright? I refuse to.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“I never said promise.”

Dennis’s eyes went to Robby’s hand, still nervously gripping the railing of the bed, and he lifted his own, resting it on the older man’s and sweeping his thumb along his knuckles. “Thank you.” His body continued to relax, the combination of comforting touch and something stronger than dollar store ibuprofen soothing his pain receptors.

“You’re gonna be okay. I wouldn’t lie to you. Do you believe me?”

“Of course I believe you. Why? Do you think I shouldn’t?”

Robby shook his head with a sudden laugh and twisted his hand until his palm was pressed against Dennis's. "I- No, I think you should."

"Can I repay you somehow?" Their hands squeezed together gently, and Dennis smiled up at him. Robby recognized the gratitude in it. It was the same smile he'd seen every time he complimented Dennis's work, every time someone mentioned snacks or fresh coffee in the break room, every time a patient called him Doctor and thanked him profusely for his care and attention and kindness.

"No need."

"Pretty sure we've already covered how I don't like having debts."

"You don't have to repay me. It's not a debt."

"Tell you what…" A heavy sigh breezed past his lips, and Dennis slipped his fingers between Robby's as he melted further into the bed and let his eyes fall closed. "I'll let you take me out to dinner sometime."

"You'll *let* me, huh?" Something less familiar to Robby but dreadfully undeniable was the fluttering in his stomach, the beating of butterfly wings tickling their way from his guts to his chest.

"Yeah. Lucky you, huh?" Before Robby could come up with some sort of witty response, something to ease the pounding of his heart before Dennis could feel the pulse in his wrist where the blonde's thumb pressed against his skin, Dennis spoke up again with a chuckle. "Uh-oh…"

"What?"

"You- When you did the ultrasound. Totally saw my nipples."

"It was purely medicinal, I promise." He squeezed their hands together again and watched as Dennis's smile broadened at the gentle pressure and returned it. "I've seen a lot of parts of a lot of people over the years."

"Still think you should've bought me dinner first. So now we're up to two."

“Two?”

“Dates.” His eyes opened again, locking instantly onto Robby’s and holding his gaze for a moment before snorting out a laugh that quickly turned into a gentle wince. “I’ve never been on pain meds like this before.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“I still mean it.”

“Mean what?”

Dennis smiled again, and a redness crept into his cheeks. “That I wanna go on two dates with you. Which is inappropriate.” He tried his best to wink, but both eyes fluttered briefly shut, his brain still foggy as he continued his trek back to full lucidity. “But I think you wanna go on two dates with me, too.”

Robby’s body shifted, turning more fully toward Dennis, and he let his thumb drag softly along the younger man’s hand, still grasped gently in his own. His other reached out, and he gently shoved back the curls resting on Dennis’s forehead where they tickled at his brow, letting his fingers linger for a moment at his hairline. “Get some rest, Dennis. I’ll be here when you wake up, alright?”

“Is that one a promise?”

“That one’s a promise.”

End Notes

Comments/Kudos greatly and sincerely appreciated if you enjoy what you've read.

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